



LETTER

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SYSTEM EXTENSIONS

USERLAND: WHAT'S THE POINT OF CONNECTED PROGRAMS?

THE IDEA IS TO BRING BACK THE FUNDAMENTAL NOTION OF THE DOS BATCH FILE.

At the same time that Microsoft is presenting its notion for how to connect documents, Userland Software is introducing something called the Userland IAC Toolkit for the Macintosh. In theory, this product is a developers kit for getting started on hooking applications together regardless of whether the target is System 6.0 (the current version) or the forthcoming System 7.0. The Userland product provides its own transport mechanism (formerly called Userland IPC) for System 6.0, but automatically supports Apple's built-in mechanism (Apple Events) in System 7.0. Userland hints broadly that it will be able to support other mechanisms on other platforms, ones like Microsoft's DDE for Windows, as well. The benefit of using Userland's stuff, theoretically, is that the developer gets a fundamentally secular way to supporting inter-program communications, one that's provided by a non-aligned developer and that will be supported on major platforms.

That's all well and good, but I have no way to evaluate the technical virtuosity of any of these approaches and won't even attempt to do so. What's interesting about Userland's approach is that Dave Winer, founder of Userland, raises a fundamental question about what the point of doing program-to-program communications is in the first place. Apple seems to have a general and not-too-well-defined notion that having programs talk to each other is good idea. Microsoft wants to give developers additional, easier ways to add functionality to their products. Winer says that the clearest benefit is for users to be able to control their computers with what he calls user-scripting systems that let the end user set up procedures that employ multiple applications. (Actually, Microsoft seems to believe in a similar idea and has been working on a notion of a standardized language for controlling applications, which is modeled on the Basic language. This is already implemented in a very preliminary fashion in the macro languages that control Excel and Word, each of which can also implement DDE commands to control each other and other Windows programs. But the language is so far only implemented internally in each application and has no implementation as a separate piece of software.)

The idea, according to Winer, is to bring back the fundamental idea of the DOS batch file (which is a text file with the .BAT extension, which DOS knows how to interpret and which can issue DOS commands and launch programs and resume control once the application quits). The batch file is a method and language for people to organize and control their computer system in exactly the way that they want to. Only the most extreme DOS users learned how to write .BAT files (yet they are the subject of endless articles in the back of *PC Magazine* and the like), although many users have learned how

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POWER USERS WILL BE ABLE TO CREATE SCRIPTS THAT CONTROL THE ACTIONS OF THEIR SOFTWARE.

to create simple batch files. Even I know how to set up a .BAT file that switches directories and launches a program, so you don't have to remember where a program file is stored. For some reason, still unclear to me at least, the notion of a batch file has never yet been implemented successfully on the Macintosh or Windows. On the Macintosh, keyboard-and-mouse macro programs such as Tempo from Affinity Microsystems or Quickeys from CE Software offer users some level of control over their programs, but there is no way to control what the application does or to edit the procedures directly. Hypercard allowed users to set up Hypertalk scripts that could launch other programs, but they couldn't control what the program did and Hypercard takes a megabyte of memory all by itself. The reason that there have been no batch files for the Macintosh (apart from religious issues) is that there has been no way to tell programs what to do or to manage multiple programs in memory at once.

And that's where Winer's notion of user scripting comes in. This is not user programming in the sense that Bill Atkinson proposed by creating Hypercard or that Philippe Kahn has proposed by developing Object View (see "New Products: Object Vision: User Programming For Windows", Issue 6.16, 12-10-90). Both of those approaches are based on the notion of trying to get non-technical users to create programs that can solve day-to-day problems. Instead, Winer's approach to user scripting is that power users, people who have made some fundamental commitment to learning about their computer system and taking the time to make it work harder, can create scripts (macros, programs, whatever) that control the actions of their off-the-shelf applications and their system software. If it's done right, then those scripts can also be distributed so that non-power users can get the benefit of the functionality.

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